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UNEMPLOYMENT**Geographic Terms:** UNITED StatesReport Available**Abstract:** The article focuses on the employment problems of returning veterans in the U.S. It explains that the unemployment rate of veterans who served since 2001 was 12.1 as of March 2012, compared to only 8.7 percent for non-veterans. The article suggest that this employment gap reflects the huge difference between how veterans are perceived publicly and how they are actually treated. It also discusses the efforts taken by the government to address the problem.**Lexile:** 1330**Full Text Word Count:** 1758**ISSN:** 03604217**Accession Number:** 76620229**Database:** MAS Ultra - School Edition**From the Front Line to the Jobless Line**

In 2006, Moses Maddox deployed to Ramadi, Iraq, a hotbed of the insurgency and one of the most dangerous places in that Middle East nation for U.S. troops. He spent much of his time standing in the open turret of an armored vehicle, bouncing violently from side to side as it rumbled down potholed streets and dirt roads. Maddox was later diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury, the signature wounds of the Iraq war.

Like hundreds of thousands of other veterans, Maddox enrolled in college when he returned home, paying his way with money from the government's new GI Bill. Earlier this year, as he prepared to graduate, he sent out 50 résumés in his search for full-time work. He got a grand total of one call back, and he didn't get that job. Months later, he is still looking for a full-time employment.

Maddox, 31, is not alone. In March, the Labor Department reported that last year's unemployment rate for veterans who have served since 2001 was 12.1 percent, significantly higher than the 8.7 percent rate for nonveterans. The disparity was even more jarring for younger veterans, who make up the bulk of the returning troops. Among male veterans ages 18 to 24, an eye-opening 19.1 percent were jobless. For nonveterans of the same age group, the rate was 17.6 percent.

With the nation about to mark Memorial Day, the persistent inability of veterans like Maddox to find full-time work serves as a grim reminder of the struggles facing troops as they return from Iraq or Afghanistan. The employment gap is also a sobering reminder of the vast gulf

between how veterans are perceived publicly and how they're actually treated. In the Vietnam War era, returning troops were sworn at and publicly derided as war criminals. Today, vets get standing ovations at baseball games and invitations to the State of the Union address. But they don't get jobs.

"To be honest, I think being a veteran makes it harder to find work, not easier," Maddox says. "People thank us for our service but are so worried that we're unstable or have mental problems that they pass over us for jobs. I'm willing to come in on the ground floor, but even that doesn't work."

The ranks of unemployed veterans is also likely to swell in coming years as budget cuts force the Pentagon to reduce the size of the Army and Marine Corps by roughly 100,000 troops. Many of those soldiers and Marines will be effectively pushed out of the armed forces, leaving them desperate to line up employment. The number of troops who will lose their jobs would balloon dramatically if the budget sequestration kicks in later this year, requiring the Pentagon to make \$500 billion in additional, automatic cuts.

There are several reasons why veterans--no matter when they leave active duty--have such trouble finding work. First, many simply have little idea of how to write a résumé, prepare for a job interview, or search out companies with openings. Service members don't have to worry about any of those things; they just do what they are assigned to do. Compounding the challenges, as military bases near major cities have consolidated into mega-facilities such as Texas's Fort Bliss--home to nearly 100,000 troops and military families--many veterans are returning to remote parts of the country. Just traveling to job centers to line up interviews is tough.

On the other side of the equation, many would-be employers have never met a soldier or a Marine, much less had any substantive interactions with them. That makes it easier to fear that former troops are potential time bombs because of their mental wounds, are too rigid to fit into a more freewheeling corporate culture, or have no real skills besides carrying weapons and killing people.

"The average human-resources manager at your average company has formed their views of troops from Hollywood and the media," says Tom Aiello, a spokesman for Sears, the company that military officials say has hired more returning veterans than any other. "They believe in all of the negative stereotypes which may exist about veterans and figure that bringing them on is simply not worth the risk."

Sears is hiring some 5,000 veterans a year, Aiello said, virtually all of whom have served in either Iraq or Afghanistan, as part of a total veteran workforce of 30,000. Perhaps fittingly, Aiello is a veteran himself; he was disabled after his Humvee rolled over shortly after the first Persian Gulf War.

Veterans' advocates identify one other major factor that makes it difficult for returning troops to find work: Many civilian employers are either unaware of the specialized skills that service members develop while in the field or are openly dismissive of that training and experience.

"Many civilians simply don't understand or respect military certifications," says David Sutherland, a retired Army colonel who was a special assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on veterans' employment issues. "You can have a military truck driver who's driven thousands of miles in Iraq being told to train alongside inexperienced 18-years-olds, or military medics who have done advanced emergency-trauma training and are being told they need run-of-the-mill first-aid training."

Linda Stanley experienced that disconnect firsthand. Her husband was a corpsman on the USS Kitty Hawk near the end of the Vietnam War, helping to treat badly wounded pilots and other troops. Back home, he couldn't get a job as an emergency medical technician or ambulance driver. Stanley, who served 21 years in the military herself, believes that many employers still don't understand exactly what returning veterans can offer them.

"They didn't look at all of his training from the Navy and say, 'Yes, you qualify for a civilian job,' " she says. "And that's the same thing that happens now."

Maddox ran into the same problem when he came home after his second Iraq tour (he also served there in 2004, working in a mortuary-affairs unit). During his stint in Ramadi, he worked in a civil-affairs unit, helping to conceive, manage, and fund small-scale construction and infrastructure projects. When Maddox looked for similar jobs in the civilian world, ideally at nongovernmental organizations, he was told that he would need a master's degree to even be considered for such a position.

"I didn't have the piece of paper, so the fact that I'd already been literally doing that job really didn't matter," he says. "Military experience really doesn't count for anything when they're looking at your résumé."

The staggering unemployment rate for returning troops has finally drawn the attention of corporate America and the White House. Amazon.com, for instance, has hired veterans for about a quarter of the jobs at its order-filling centers, according to a recent article in *Fortune*. In a symbolic gesture, Amazon has created a commemorative coin, modeled on those given out by military commanders, which features the logos of the five military services on one side and its corporate logo on the other. The conference rooms at one facility in Phoenix have names like Mess Hall and Bunker. In a more substantive move, the company is considering a new effort to hire disabled veterans as "virtual" customer-service representatives, according to the article.

"We actively seek leaders who can invent, think big, have a bias for action, and deliver results on behalf of our customers," Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos told the magazine. "These principles look very familiar to men and women who have served our country in the armed forces, and we find that their experience leading people is invaluable."

G.I. Jobs magazine has spent the past decade ranking companies on how well they recruit and retain veterans. Amazon occupied the top spot this year. Managing Editor Dean Fazio said he wished more companies appreciated just how much veterans could bring to private-sector companies.

"Veterans benefit from the best training in the world and have been responsible for other people's lives and millions of dollars' worth of equipment in harsh environments. They have learned to make hard decisions and adapt quickly when the plan goes awry," he says. "How could that not be valuable to corporate America?"

The Obama administration has teamed with the private sector on an initiative called "Joining Forces," which seeks to find at least 15,000 jobs for veterans in coming years. Last month on *The Colbert Report*, host Stephen Colbert joked with President Obama that private companies should hire a veteran because "with the stories he tells of his previous job, it will really make the interoffice complaining sound trivial." Obama replied that it would definitely be "hard to be a whiner around a veteran."

Veterans already get preferential treatment when they apply for federal jobs ranging from park rangers to Defense Department contracting personnel. But government jobs are drying

up as the administration's economic stimulus winds down and the Republicans in Congress push for far-ranging austerity measures designed to close the nation's yawning budget deficit.

Sutherland, who retired from the military to focus solely on helping veterans find employment, is hoping to work around the government's hiring slowdown. During his time on the Joint Chiefs staff, the Iraq veteran visited more than 329 cities and towns in 42 states. He now wants to build local organizations in hundreds of communities to make it easier for veterans to find jobs and reacclimate to civilian life. Some of these initiatives are led by churches or schools; in Boise, Idaho, the police department is taking the lead role.

Sutherland also wants to team with Easter Seals, which has more than 500 affiliates nationwide working to help returning troops find their way into civilian jobs. He says he is encouraged by the way colleges and universities are joining the fight; Syracuse University's Whitman School of Management sponsored a weeklong "Entrepreneurship Boot Camp for Veterans With Disabilities," and Vassar College became the first school in the country to partner with a foundation dedicated to offering small numbers of returning troops full scholarships to highly selective, highly expensive universities.

"Veterans don't need a handout or pity," he says. "They need a hand up and a start."

Maddox, for his part, has found a part-time job at Palomar Community College in San Marcos, Calif., helping to ensure that the 1,100 veterans enrolled there stick to their courses and make progress toward their degrees. "It's \$13 an hour, 20 hours a week, so it's not much," he says. "But it's a start."

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By Yochi J. Dreazen

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